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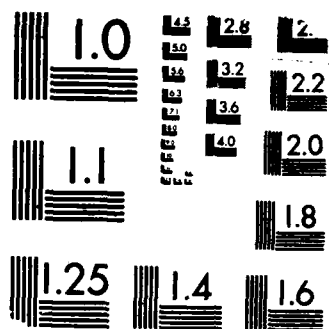
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# AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

## STUDENT REPORT

FIGHTER PILOT RETENTION  
AND  
THE SQUADRON PERSPECTIVE

MAJOR URBAN E. DISHART III 88-0750  
*"insights into tomorrow"*

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**REPORT NUMBER** 88-0750

**TITLE** FIGHTER PILOT RETENTION AND THE SQUADRON PERSPECTIVE

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Submitted to the faculty in partial fulfillment of  
requirements for graduation.

**AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE  
AIR UNIVERSITY  
MAXWELL AFB, AL 36112-5542**

A192 6/7

| REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE   |       |  |  | Form Approved<br>OMB No. 0704-0188                  |                    |                            |
|---|-------|--|--|---|--------------------|----------------------------|
| 1a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION<br><b>UNCLASSIFIED</b>   |       |  | 1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS   |   |                    |                            |
| 2a. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY   |       |  | 3. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY OF REPORT<br><b>STATEMENT "A"</b><br>Approved for public release;<br>Distribution is unlimited. |   |                    |                            |
| 2b. DECLASSIFICATION / DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE   |       |  |  |   |                    |                            |
| 4. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)<br>88-0750  |       |  | 5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)  |   |                    |                            |
| 6a. NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION<br>ACSC/EDC   |       | 6b. OFFICE SYMBOL<br>(if applicable)     | 7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION  |   |                    |                            |
| 6c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)<br>Maxwell AFB AL 36112-5542  |       |  | 7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)  |   |                    |                            |
| 8a. NAME OF FUNDING / SPONSORING ORGANIZATION   |       | 8b. OFFICE SYMBOL<br>(if applicable)     | 9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER  |   |                    |                            |
| 8c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)   |       |  | 10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS  |   |                    |                            |
|   |       |  | PROGRAM<br>ELEMENT NO.   | PROJECT<br>NO.                                      | TASK<br>NO.        | WORK UNIT<br>ACCESSION NO. |
| 11. TITLE (Include Security Classification)<br>FIGHTER PILOT RETENTION AND THE SQUADRON PERSPECTIVE   |       |  |  |   |                    |                            |
| 12. PERSONAL AUTHOR(S)<br>Dishart, Urban E. III, Major, USAF  |       |  |  |   |                    |                            |
| 13a. TYPE OF REPORT   |       | 13b. TIME COVERED<br>FROM _____ TO _____ |  | 14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day)<br>1988 April |                    | 15. PAGE COUNT<br>26       |
| 16. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION  |       |  |  |   |                    |                            |
| 17. COSATI CODES  |       |  | 18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)  |   |                    |                            |
| FIELD   | GROUP | SUB-GROUP                                |  |   |                    |                            |
|   |       |  |  |   |                    |                            |
|   |       |  |  |   |                    |                            |
| 19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)  |       |  |  |   |                    |                            |
| <p>➤ The USAF is currently experiencing a serious pilot retention problem that is not merely a short-term cyclical phenomenon. Retention numbers are low and forecast to remain that way into the next decade. This study will discuss fighter pilot retention in the Tactical Air Forces (TAF) and suggest a perspective from the squadron level. This study will review the history of pilot retention, describe the causes of the attrition, discuss programs that respond to those causes, and show the unit level perspective. The study concludes that fighter pilots are leaving the Air Force for reasons that go beyond the financial draw of the airlines and that the solution to the problem is in the fighter squadron itself. ✓</p> |       |  |  |   |                    |                            |
| 20. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT<br><input type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT. <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS   |       |  | 21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION<br>UNCLASSIFIED   |   |                    |                            |
| 22a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL<br>ACSC/EDC Maxwell AFB AL 36112-5542   |       |  | 22b. TELEPHONE (Include Area Code)<br>(205) 293-2867   |   | 22c. OFFICE SYMBOL |                            |

## PREFACE

The United States Air Force is currently experiencing a serious pilot retention problem. Periods of pilot retention shortfalls have occurred regularly throughout the past three decades. These ebbs in the retention figures coincide with periods of economic prosperity in our country. It is during these times that airline pilot requirements increase and military pilots make the jump to civilian aviation careers. That jump is due to both the opportunity outside the Air Force and the career irritants within. It is both of these factors that ultimately force a pilot's final decision to separate. While this phenomenon is not new to the Air Force, it now appears to be a long-term problem that will remain well into the next decade. This report will review the fighter pilot retention dilemma and provide a squadron level perspective of the issue.

The author wishes to acknowledge several individuals for their invaluable support of this research project. First, to Lieutenant Colonel Edward "Buster" Ellis: thanks for his patient guidance which kept the report on track. To Majors J.J. Schraeder and Lenny Bates, from the Headquarters, Tactical Air Command, Directorate of Personnel Division: appreciation for a wealth of data and assistance. Also, thanks to Major Scott Hente, who, as word processor and editor, taught a fighter pilot how to write in English. Finally, a special thanks to all the excellent squadron commanders and operations officers who the author has had the pleasure to work for and take notes from for thirteen years.

This material is being submitted to the faculty of Troy State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science Degree in Personnel Management.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major Urban E. Dishart, III, received a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from West Virginia University and was commissioned through the university's Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps program in May 1974. He graduated from Undergraduate Pilot Training at Moody AFB, Georgia, in November, 1975 and completed F-4 transition training at MacDill AFB, Florida, in October 1976. His first operational assignment was as an F-4D Aircraft Commander with the 25th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Kadena AB, Japan, from November 1976 to May 1979.

In May 1979, Major Dishart was transferred to the 68th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Moody AFB, Georgia. While there, he served as an F-4E Instructor Pilot, Squadron Weapons Officer, and Standardization and Evaluation Flight Examiner. Major Dishart also served as an instructor in the Pave Spike and Maverick weapons systems and was a member of the 1981 347th Tactical Fighter Wing Gunsmoke team.

In March 1982, Major Dishart was transferred to MacDill AFB, Florida, where he completed F-16 transition and instructor training. He served as an F-16 Instructor Pilot and Standardization and Evaluation Officer with the 72nd Tactical Fighter Training Squadron and as a Wing Flight Examiner and Flight Commander in the 63rd Tactical Fighter Training Squadron.

From January 1986 to May 1987, Major Dishart was assigned to the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, Kunsan AB, Korea. While in Korea, he served as a Flight Commander in the 35th Tactical Fighter Squadron and as the Chief, Wing Standardization and Evaluation Division.

Major Dishart is a Senior Pilot with over 2,600 hours of flying time in fighter aircraft. He is a graduate of Squadron Officer School and is currently attending Air Command and Staff College.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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**REPORT NUMBER** 88-0750

**AUTHOR(S)** MAJOR URBAN E. DISHART, III, USAF

**TITLE** FIGHTER PILOT RETENTION AND THE SQUADRON PERSPECTIVE

I. Purpose: To establish the causes of fighter pilot attrition from the USAF tactical forces and provide an insight into the problem from the unit level perspective in an effort to enhance fighter pilot retention.

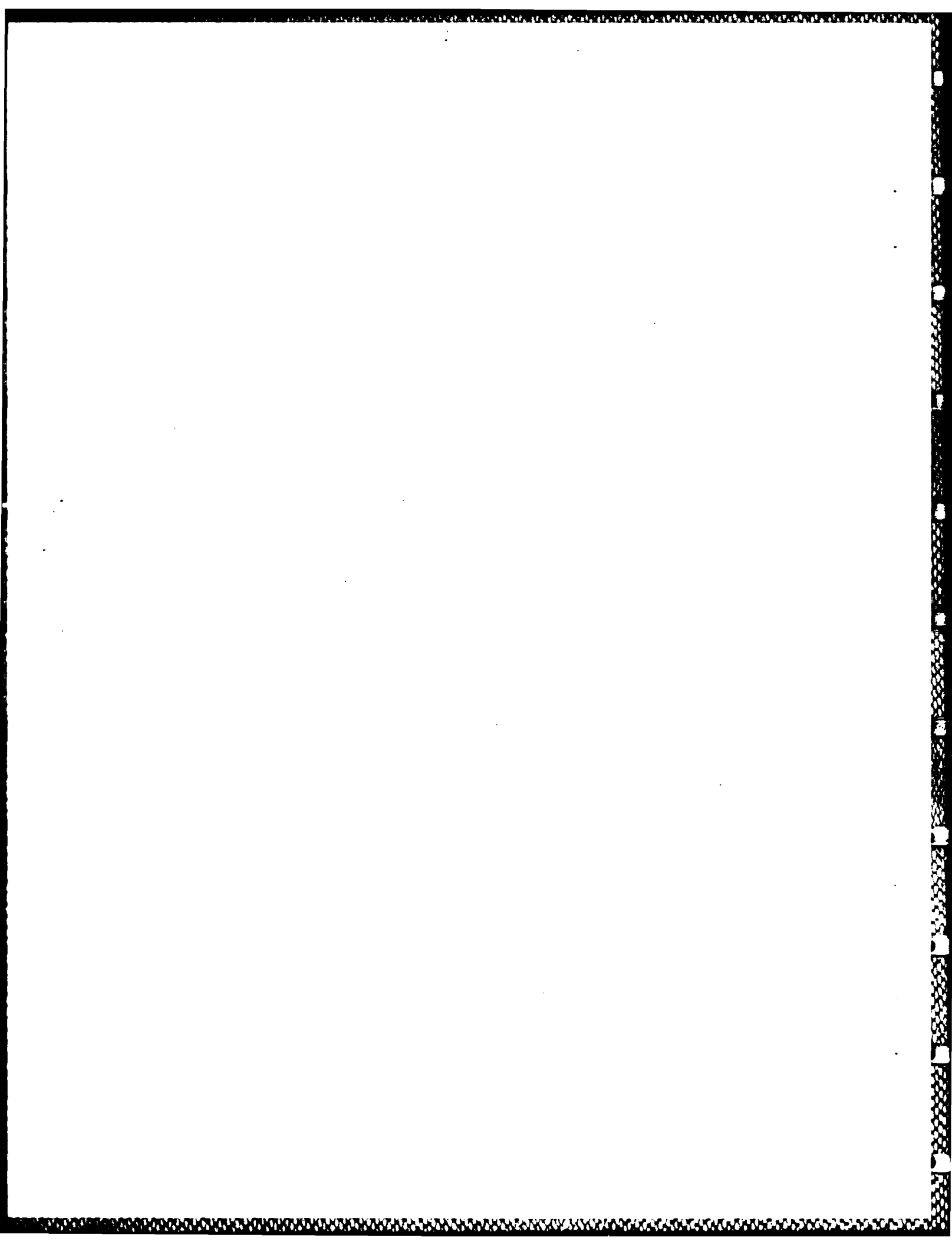
II. Problem: Although a great deal of effort has been devoted to answering the causes of pilot attrition, retention of experienced fighter pilots continues to be a serious problem to the Tactical Air Forces. The primary impact is on the ability to maintain a viable combat ready force. Identifying the roots of pilot dissatisfaction and providing logical answers to the problem remains a challenge to the Air Force. While it is at the fighter squadron where the greatest effort is felt, it is also at the squadron where the greatest potential exists to positively impact retention.

## CONTINUED

III. Data: The USAF is currently in the midst of a serious pilot retention dilemma. Periods of retention shortfalls have occurred throughout the past three decades. These low periods in pilot retention have historically been associated with periods of economic growth that have provided opportunities outside of the Air Force. The expansion of the commercial airlines has absorbed many of our separating pilots. Military pilots make the jump to civilian aviation careers because of the outside opportunities and the career irritants on the inside. This trend should continue well into the 1990's and remain a challenge to the Air Force. Many programs have been initiated in an attempt to curb the exodus. Efforts continue to find answers to the retention problem in an attempt to maintain an effective combat ready force.

IV. Conclusions: The pilot retention problem is real and the solution will not come overnight. The Air Force leadership has recognized the task and is pursuing answers. However, the key is at the squadron where the squadron commander has the ultimate influence and challenge to keep quality fighter pilots in the Air Force.

V. Recommendations: The USAF must continue its efforts at retaining quality aviators. Programs to study the problem and recommend solutions must seek long-term goals. The emphasis should be on the elimination of career irritants that contribute to dissatisfaction. Most importantly, the role of quality leadership at the squadron level must be recognized as the key to the retention issue.



## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

Pilot retention in the United States military services, the associated personnel problems, and the attention of senior officers, is not a phenomenon unique to the 1980's. Any pilot who has served in the Air Force has witnessed the periodic emigration of fellow aviators. These cyclical attritions are evidenced by the wealth of information concerning pilot retention available from various periods of the last three decades.

What is unique about the pilot retention problem today is the attitude of the pilots regarding their decision to separate. In the past, emotions drove the final move out of the service. Long duty hours, extensive temporary duty (TDY), low pay and other factors pushed quality people away from the Air Force. Sincere efforts on the part of Air Force leadership has reduced the job irritant level through such vehicles as the "Captains Concerns Conference" sponsored by the Tactical Air Command (TAC). The difference today in the attitude of separating fighter pilots is that it is not an emotional decision. They are weighing the benefits of their career options and making logical decisions based on their criteria. As a supervisor, the most frustrating aspect is the difficulty in arguing with this logic. While flight pay, TDY's, and assignments dominate the casual weather day conversation in the average fighter squadron, they are part of the overall large scale problem and, unfortunately, little can be done at the unit level to improve these aspects of military flying.

Today's fighter pilot is pushed and pulled in his decision to separate. The pull comes from the opportunities on the outside. The airlines are hiring at record rates due to their economic success and deregulation. This trend is expected to continue well into the 1990's. (15:5) Additionally, the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve have acquired the latest fighter aircraft, such as the F-16, F-15, and A-10. Pilots see these opportunities as the best of both worlds. The push out of the service comes from

those recurring irritants that periodically become the topic of Air War College and Air Command and Staff College research papers. Browsing through the Air University Library card catalogue reveals the pilot retention problem is not new to military aviation.

This paper will address the military pilot retention issue from a limited scope. It will limit the discussion to the Tactical Air Forces (TAF) fighter pilot retention problem and further suggest a perspective from the unit or squadron level. Although many options are being explored by the Air Force personnel community to reduce pilot attrition, they do little to help the real time problem faced by a squadron commander who has two pilots with their separation papers in and several others talking about it.

## Chapter Two

### RETENTION BACKGROUND

After the Viet Nam conflict, numerous pilots left the active duty forces due to the large decrease in pilot requirements. The pilot manning situation stabilized briefly around 1977, when the total pilot inventory was reduced to approximate the level of pilot requirements. At that time the national outlook changed and with improved political support, the number of pilot slots was increased. On the other hand, the internal and external factors causing pilots to separate increased greatly during this period. This was when the dip in the retention curve was at its lowest in over 13 years. The senior Air Force leadership became intensely concerned about the causes of these pilot separations. Likewise, they became keenly interested in eliminating those causes. (16:Ch II)

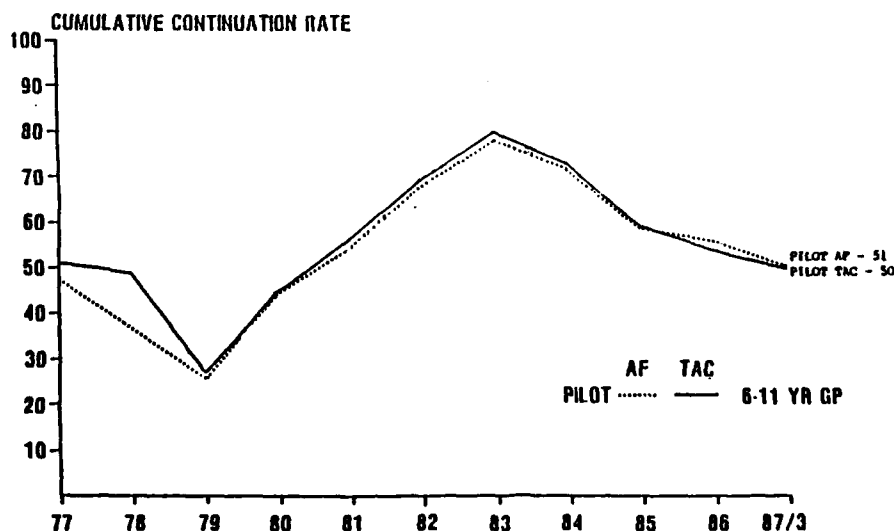


FIGURE 1: RATED RETENTION - AF vs TAC  
Source: TAC Pilot Retention Briefing, October, 1987.

Cumulative Continuation Rate (CCR) is the measure that the Air Force uses to analyze retention. It is defined as "the percent of officers entering a given year group who would complete a designated period of service if current retention patterns remained the same, computed on a 12 month basis". (13:5) For example, a 60 % rate for pilots in the 6 to 11 year group means that for every 100 pilots entering the sixth year of commissioned service, 60 would complete the 11th year if current rates persisted. The pilot CCR (for the 6 to 11 year group) for the Air Force changes every year, but had a low in 1978 and 1979 of 38% and 26% respectively. (12:--) These were large year groups, the airlines were hiring and political support for the military was very low. Since then, retention rebounded as high as 78% in 1983. From 1981 through 1986, the CCR was never lower than 54%, which represents the minimum level necessary to keep the Air Force pilot requirements filled. The overall Air Force CCR for Fiscal Year 87 dropped to 48%. (4:12) These figures are from the retention group at the Air Force Military Personnel Center (AFMPC). (12:--) The retention group further breaks CCR down into retention rates for the various weapon systems flown by the Air Force.

Historically, fighter pilot retention has been the highest in the Air Force of all major weapon systems, although it moves on the same general trend as the rest of the pilot corps. In 1979 it dropped to 36% and then gradually climbed to 80% by 1983, which was an all time high. But 1984 through 1986 saw a decline to 63% with 1987 dropping to 43%. A 58% CCR is required by the Tactical Air Forces to man the fighter force requirements. (12:--; 17:--)

It is obvious the retention issue is real and is impacting the entire rated Air Force. Pilot training is time consuming and expensive. When the Air Force loses a fighter pilot, it loses a very substantial investment as is evidenced by the following table:



|                                | F-4         | F-15        | F-16        |
|--------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| BASIC COSTS (OFFICER TNG, UPT) | \$397,818   | \$397,818   | \$397,818   |
| FIGHTER TRAINING (LIT, RTU)    | \$1,018,272 | \$1,539,523 | \$1,376,355 |
| MISSION QUAL TRAINING          | \$186,652   | \$216,389   | \$138,807   |
| MISSION READY TNG/YEAR         | \$1,515,893 | \$1,783,517 | \$1,126,844 |
| TOTAL COST (3 YEAR OPS TOUR)   | \$6,150,421 | \$7,504,281 | \$5,293,512 |

Notes: 1. UPT Graduate to Fighters  
2. Officer Promoted to 1st Lt soon after MR upgrade  
3. Pilot Flies 200 Hours/Year in MR status

Figure 2: THE COST OF A FIGHTER PILOT

Source: TAC Pilot Retention Briefing, October, 1987.

With millions of dollars invested in these high value people, a serious effort to reduce their attrition from the active fighter force is imperative. Due to that investment the Air Force needs to understand the factors which push and pull its pilots out of active duty.

## Chapter Three

### THE PUSH AND PULL

There are basically two forces exerting pressure on the pilot retention problem in the military. They are those issues, irritants, causes and concerns that "push" pilots out of the military and those that "pull" them out. It is these internal and external factors that ultimately influence a pilot's career decision. Many studies have been accomplished and surveys distributed in an effort to establish a finite list of these factors. Of course, those factors are probably as numerous as the separation papers at the personnel office. This chapter is a general discussion of a few of those primary concern areas: outside opportunities, career uncertainties, pay, and family life.

### OUTSIDE OPPORTUNITIES

Many opportunities outside of the Air Force allow a pilot to do what he loves most - fly. The airline industry is a major factor with record numbers of pilots hired in the last several years. Heavy airline hiring is expected to continue into the 1990s due to industry expansion and retirements.

All major airlines in the United States soon will be faced with a crisis: they will be losing pilots at a faster rate than they can replace them...In fact, the entire population of pilots in the United States, including both professional and recreational pilots, has been aging and shrinking, and both trends show no sign of slowing down. And while the big picture may be worrisome, a shortage of airline pilots is downright critical. (10:23)

When airline hiring rates are up, so too are the separation rates for military pilots. The airline industry goes in cycles for hiring new pilots. The last big cycle,

in 1978-1979, was associated with a major exodus from the Air Force during that period.

In the next decade, the major airlines will add about 14,000 pilot slots and will see nearly 18,000 pilots retire. That means airlines will need nearly 32,000 more pilots over that time span...The airlines could conceivably hire every military pilot who wants to get out. Assuming zero growth in the airline industry for the next 10 years - not a good assumption - retirements alone create enough demand for separating military pilots to allow for a continued, extremely low retention rate. (11:1)

The airlines have been forced to change hiring practices and are changing age and flying requirements to attract pilots. Good news for the Air Force is that the airlines are hiring retired pilots and are even going so far as to actively recruit those officers approaching 20 years of service. For example, American Airlines sends recruitment letters and solicits applications for a second career in commercial aviation. (19:--)

Another serious "pull" is the outside opportunity offered to separating pilots by the Air Reserve Forces (ARF): the Air National Guard (ANG) and the Air Force Reserve (AFRES). The ARF is expanding, modernizing, and converting. Today, with F-15s and F-16s in the ANG and AFRES, the opportunity to fly the most advanced weapon systems also exists outside of the active force. Finally, the ARF provides the opportunity to have the best of both worlds. Specifically, a pilot can fly fighters in the ARF and have a lucrative income with the airlines at a stable location. That is a difficult combination to beat when quality-of-life is high on one's priorities.

### CAREER UNCERTAINTIES

Career uncertainties cover a broad area of concern that primarily includes promotions and assignments. Many fighter pilots perceive that flying aptitude and skills are not measured into the promotion equation. The general feeling is that advanced degrees, professional military education (PME) and additional duties are more important for promotion than flying performance. Most pilots feel they can probably

be promoted to major in a flying position, but must go to a staff and career broaden to make lieutenant colonel. They also rarely see a below-the-zone promotion for a squadron pilot. Those are rewards for the flyer who leaves the cockpit. These perceptions are reinforced by the Air Force's "whole man" concept. The system tends to track everyone in the same career direction assuming all officers have the same goals. Not everyone wants to be the Air Force Chief of Staff.

The Officer Effectiveness Report (OER) carries the greatest weight in the promotion system. For the fighter pilot, the OER usually neglects the flying accomplishments and dwells on additional duties. The primary discriminator is the level of indorsement. Recent changes have been made in an attempt to control or equalize general officer indorsements. However, the procedures are still very arbitrary. Overall, the young fighter pilot feels that the way to advance and be promoted is not by working towards being the best fighter pilot he can be, but by concentrating on additional duties, a masters degree and PME.

#### PAY

Pay and entitlements are constantly the subject of debate when retention is down. Fighter pilots, as do other Air Force officers, realize that they will never get rich in the service, but they do live very comfortably and acquire most of their needs. However, the perception is that pay is at the mercy of Congress who is slowly whittling away the benefits and entitlements. These include retirement benefits, Variable Housing Allowance (VHA), and dependent medical care, just to name a few. Flight pay has not been increased since 1981 when it was increased in an effort to retain pilots. A study conducted by two staff officers at the Air Force Academy in 1987 concluded, "A career as an Air Force pilot is a distant second to flying with a major airline in terms of pay, benefits, and job conditions". (15:31) The study lists comparisons in pay, medical benefits, retirement, dependent travel, and time off.

The military will never be able to pay as well as the private sector and anyone who stays in the Air Force for financial reasons is misinformed. However, with such congressional action as the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings deficit reduction legislation in force, lean years are ahead in

government spending. This year, once again, the military pay raise was limited to 2 percent which is well below the inflation rate. (1:8) The perception that cutting defense spending means further benefit cuts could cause some "fence sitters" to make the final decision to separate.

### FAMILY LIFE

The final area of general concern is the effect of the military flying career on family life. It is the most emotional issue because of the involvement and affect on loved ones. Many studies are dedicated to this subject alone.

A typical fighter pilot spends about 10 hours a day at the squadron, occupied with flying and additional duties. When a fighter wing is in an exercise, those hours are extended and weekend duty becomes standard. Hours are seldom regular, so a fighter pilot rarely gets home to have a "normal" dinner with the family. In Europe and stateside F-16 locations such as Hill AFB, a squadron may be TDY to fair weather locations for as much as a third of the year. TDY is great for flying, but difficult on the family who is left behind to fend for itself. Wives begin to feel like single parents because the fathers aren't home.

The instability of frequent moves puts additional strain on the military family. The expense of buying and selling a home every three years is a financial burden. Realtor fees alone eat up profits and families feel lucky to just break even. Additionally, the strain of pulling up roots is difficult on children who must continually adapt to new schools and friends.

The family issue of the working wife is receiving attention today at the Air Staff level. According to the retention office at AFMPC, almost 50 percent of officers' wives work. (13:12) If not already a career woman, many would pursue a career if it fit the military lifestyle. Regular moves and the demand of command positions limit that chance. American society is rapidly changing and the Air Force must be responsive to the changes.

## Chapter Four

### ANSWERS

What is an appropriate response to the forces that pull and push our fighter pilots out of the Air Force? Of course, there is no single solution to the problem. Potential answers are as numerous as the reasons pilots leave. Fortunately, the Air Force leadership is concerned and several proposals to alleviate attrition are under study. This chapter will briefly outline some of those proposals and explore other possibilities with regard to a few of the areas discussed in the previous chapter.

### OUTSIDE OPPORTUNITIES

The career opportunities outside of the Air Force create the largest draw on the military pilot force. This area is also the most difficult to address because of the inability of Air Force decisions to impact beyond its span of control. Generally speaking, if a fighter pilot wants to separate, there is a job for him either in the airlines or with the ARF. According to the Future Aviation Professionals of America (FAPA), over 75 percent of the pilots hired in 1987, by Delta, Northwest, and U.S. Air were ex-military pilots. Although some of these pilots were retired, the majority were separated officers. (8:95) There is a trend now towards hiring retired pilots, but this is due mainly to the demand that the industry is experiencing. An effort should be made to encourage the airline industry to increase their draw from the ranks of retired military pilots vice the active duty force. By hiring retired military pilots, the airlines would have a constant source of dedicated professional aviators. Since these pilots have a retirement benefit program, personnel costs could be reduced with special contracts arranged that limit the airline retirement program. In other words, retired military aviators would work for salary only. A higher starting salary could be offered which would be more attractive. Air Force retention experts believe that the trend of hiring pilots age 40 and over also takes the

pressure off younger Air Force pilots. Previously, pilots had to decide earlier in the career whether to apply to the airlines or stay in the service. Now, with over-40 hiring, they can wait longer to make that decision. (2:12)

### PAY

The government can never match the financial draw of the airlines. However, something must be done to at least increase pay and benefits in an effort to reduce importance of money in the overall career decision.

Flight pay, or Aviation Career Incentive Pay (ACIP), has not been increased since 1981. The Air Force and Navy had proposed a 29 percent increase in ACIP in 1988. However, the Army and Marine Corps, due to their pilot force makeup, did not support the ACIP increase. Since all the services must support the increase, it is unlikely that flight pay will improve. (19:--)

A more likely answer is an annual bonus for pilots who extend their active duty commitment. This bonus is targeted at the 6 to 11 year group, by offering the bonus to pilots after their initial six-year service obligation. The proposal calls for \$12,000 per year for a four, five, or six year obligation. (6:1) It is likely this would alleviate the attrition of the younger fighter pilots. No doubt, it will also cause many hard feelings among the older officers who are not eligible. Imagine an operations officer in a fighter squadron with captains working for him who make more money. Additionally, the bonus may only provide a short term fix to the retention problem with pilots waiting until after the bonus commitment to separate.

Another plan would provide an investment program to career pilots. The Air Force would contribute to a vested fund in the officer's name. The fund could be in money markets, mutual funds, or bonds, and the interest reinvested. The officer would have access to the investment only after the 20-year point. (19:--)

Regardless of the method, a way to bring pay and benefits more in line with outside opportunities is a must. Although matching the financial draw of the airlines is impractical, an effort to reduce the disparity would improve retention. Due to the expense of training an experienced

fighter pilot, retaining that asset is far less expensive than replacement.

### CAREER UNCERTAINTIES

It is in the area of career uncertainties where the Air Force has the most opportunity to impact the retention problem. Of major concern to many fighter pilots is the ability to fly throughout their career. The perceived necessity to go to in-residence schooling or staff duty is a career irritant. The fact is many pilots would rather stay in the cockpit and have little desire to go higher in rank than lieutenant colonel. A proposal for a 20-year, fly-only career path is under study. At approximately the 10-year point, a pilot could pursue one of two options. He could remain in a flying career path or look to career-broadening assignments. (3:--) Not all officers want to be a general officer and a fly-only career path would allow a pilot to fulfill his original Air Force ambition.

The promotion and Officer Effectiveness Report (OER) system has seen some recent changes with more needed. Indorsement levels have been controlled since 1985 when guidelines were established at the general officer level to limit inflated indorsements. (5:6) Additionally, promotion folders at AFMPC have excess PME masked and officers can no longer enroll in a PME course until they are eligible. Advanced degrees should also be masked to reduce the weight of non duty-related factors in the promotion decision. A fighter pilot must believe that he can be successful and be promoted by being the best warrior possible. A realistic promotion and OER system that measures potential based on performance is the key to easing some of the career uncertainties faced by today's fighter pilot.

The solutions to the pilot retention dilemma are varied and complex. There is no finite list and no way to ensure that everyone is satisfied. However, many of those attrition factors have been identified by Air Force leaders and are receiving the attention needed to find solutions. General Russ, commander of the Tactical Air Command has said "Fighter pilot retention is my number one concern." (18:--)



## Chapter Five

### THE SQUADRON PERSPECTIVE

It is at the squadron level that the fighter pilot retention dilemma has the greatest impact. It is also at the squadron level where the greatest opportunity exists to directly influence the career decisions of our line pilots. Supervisors sense the frustration of the young officers as they are pushed and pulled by all the factors that influence that decision. Granted, there is little a squadron commander can do with regards to flight pay, benefits, and airline opportunities. However, he is perceived by his pilots as the direct link with the "they" who influence those decisions. He is primarily the one who will make or break a squadron. The success of the organization is directly proportional to the success of his leadership. Although he shares some of those responsibilities with the operations officer, it is the squadron commander's ultimate task to make the environment and challenge of being an Air Force aviator more attractive than those opportunities on the outside.

General Larry D. Welch, the Air Force Chief of Staff, has emphasized retention issues that go beyond the financial aspect. He has said "Better pay alone won't keep pilots. The Air Force needs more than an increase in aviation career incentive pay to improve pilot retention. The service must also do a better job of telling pilots how important their positions as aircrew members are." (7:1) The general further believes that, although record airline hiring is a major factor in the retention problem, studies show that the airlines tend to provide a "golden parachute" for pilots who are dissatisfied for other reasons. (7:6)

In an effort to reduce dissatisfaction at the unit level and allow pilots to concentrate on their primary duty, many career irritants have been eliminated. For instance, at many training bases civilian contract instructors perform duties as simulator console operators. The Runway Supervisory Officer (RSO) duty has been eliminated at most TAC bases. The Squadron Adjutant Program provides a non-

rated junior officer in the fighter squadrons to attend to executive officer duties. Many squadron buildings have been remodeled to provide a pleasant working environment and contribute to esprit de corps. The list continues and includes such small things as allowing fighter pilots the luxury of the "afterburner tuck" in the flight cap. Leather flight jackets and stars on the sleeves of flight suits are additional attempts to boost morale and reestablish the pride in being a fighter pilot. (19:--)

Although these efforts have done much to improve the overall lot of TAC fighter pilots, it is in the squadron itself where the commander has the ultimate influence. Most fighter jocks set their career goal sights on being a fighter squadron commander. It is considered by many to be the best job in the Air Force. As such, the image that the commander projects must be one that others want to emulate. In the long run, they should want his job. As a result, the squadron commander's personal image has to set an example and lend credibility to his position. Lt Col Scott Sonnenberg, in his article in TAC Attack, summed-up his thoughts on this aspect of being a fighter squadron commander as follows:

The only guidance I gave my schedulers was to put me as #1 as often as practical during normal flying, and always as #1 during exercises or contingencies...the first man out the door in times of pressure should be the squadron commander. Let the operations officer run the squadron operations. That is what he is paid for. You are paid to lead, to set the example, to set the standard, to be out front. (9:4-5)

In addition to possessing credibility, the individual squadron commander must understand the issues at hand by educating himself on wages, benefits, retention initiatives, and the assignment system. He is the career development officer and resource manager of every officer in the squadron. By understanding the goals and perceptions of the pilots and by having a realistic view of the assignment process, he can reduce the confusion that contributes to career dissatisfaction. By being an effective counselor and communicator, he provides the key link between the aircrews and Air Force leadership to make retention work.

To summarize the role of the squadron commander and the unit-level approach to fighter pilot retention, there are

clear-cut guidelines as outlined by Major Monte V. Cooper in his Air Command and Staff College research study, "The Flying Squadron Commander's Role in Rated Officer Retention":

First, the retention program and the person presenting it must possess untarnished credibility if it is to be effective. Second, the individual squadron commander must thoroughly understand the issues at hand and the implications of each on his subordinates. Third, communication must be factual and regularly forthcoming to preclude a feedback void and its associated grapevine problems. Fourth, since it has been shown that aircrews actively seek out career counselling and advice from their squadron commanders, commanders must be at least acquainted with basic counselling concepts. Fifth, retention programs need not be hard-sell nor distorted through overemphasis. Rather, a more favorable response can be attained if they are rational, well conceived, and reinforced. Sixth, the positive aspects of an Air Force career must receive emphasis in counselling. Seventh, a higher headquarters institutional commitment must be present if the program is to effectively communicate and achieve its goal. Finally, it must be recognized that the individual flying squadron commanders possess the key role in the retention equation. Only they are close enough to the problem to know the pulse of the aircrews. In sum, the squadron commanders represent the key link between their aircrews and Air Force leadership - only they can make the program work. (14:26-27)

## Chapter Six

### CONCLUSION

Pilot retention in the military is a serious problem that impacts the Air Force's ability to maintain a viable, combat ready force within fiscal constraints. Changes are necessary and needed soon. The country faces a shortfall in total pilots for the foreseeable future and the fighter pilot is the most specialized and highly trained of the entire group. The problem is accentuated by the fact that fighter pilots can always cross train into airline pilots but the inverse is not true. The Air Force loses and never gains.

This paper has attempted to look at the overall fighter pilot retention dilemma. First, a review of the recent history of military attrition provided a synopsis of the retention data. Second, a description of the internal and external forces affecting retention investigated the reasons associated with fighter pilots' decisions to separate. Third, Air Force programs to alleviate attrition were explored along with other proposals. Finally, the perspective from the tactical fighter squadron itself and the role of the squadron commander in the overall retention issue has provided a unit-level insight to this complex issue.

The problem is real and the solution will not come overnight. The Air Force leadership has recognized the task and is pursuing answers. However, the key is at the squadron where the squadron commander has the ultimate influence and challenge to maintain a force that is ready to fly, fight, and win.

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